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SUBJECT: LIBERIAN REFUGEES IN GHANA FACE MAJOR CHANGES

REF: MONROVIA 748

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The mood at Budumburam Refugee Camp, 25 miles west of Accra, is somewhat tense, as the June 30 deadline for repatriating to Liberia with UNHCR assistance has passed. A last-minute surge resulted in over 1,000 refugees signing up to repatriate, but change is coming even for those who elect to stay put in Ghana. Various GOG officials have told refugees they plan to close the camp and scatter the remaining 40,000 registered and unregistered Liberians among various locations in Ghana, some as far away as Kumasi, five hours to the northwest. UNHCR supports the decision to close the camp but notes that the GOG will have to manage the process carefully and communicate more clearly if it is to gain the refugees' cooperation. End Summary.

A Visit to Budumburam

12. (U) Refugee Coordinator and RC Assistant visited Budumburam Camp on June 26 as part of the RCA's orientation. Meeting with the camp manager and refugee council president, we learned that UNHCR had conducted another go-and-see visit to Liberia (reftel). According to the council president, the impact of this visit was profound, as Liberia's economic progress was much in evidence. He told RefCoord that, while he had long resisted the idea of repatriation, he was now very impressed with the changes taking place in Liberia.

13. (SBU) The camp manager and council president argued that refugees needed more time to decide whether to repatriate. Ref Coord noted that a tripartite agreement concerning repatriation had been signed in October 2004 and that the June 30 deadline was firm, with no possibility of an extension. When asked for numbers signing up for the trip home, neither could provide figures, but they agreed that interest in repatriation was at all all-time high. (Note: UNHCR later confirmed that 1,050 refugees had signed up to repatriate and that eight movements are scheduled during the month of July. End note.)

14. (SBU) Ref Coord again mentioned the large number of jobs available in Liberia, including NGO workers, policemen, soldiers, and teachers. He told them some good-paying jobs with NGO and UN organizations were being taken by foreigners because there were not enough qualified Liberians to fill them. RefCoord added that for those who decided to stay in Ghana, it was likely that it would no longer be life-as-usual.

15. (SBU) Many refugees in the camp told Ref Coord and RCA that they could not return to Liberia because of the trauma they experienced during the civil war. Others said they wanted vocational training before repatriation. Ref Coord pointed out that there were many vocational training programs already set up in Liberia; newly arriving refugees were welcome to take advantage of them.

The UNHCR Perspective

16. (SBU) UNHCR Representative Aida Haile Mariam told Ref Coord on July 5 that the GOG had already spoken to refugees about the camp

closure and their impending dispersal. However, the GOG spokesman reportedly used flowery language that was difficult for the Liberians to comprehend. Haile agreed with us that the timing was unfortunate. If the announcement of the camp closure had been made earlier, more refugees might have signed up to repatriate, she thought. Nonetheless, UNHCR supported the concept of dispersion in principle, since it was preferable for refugees to integrate with local communities rather than to concentrate in an artificial camp setting. As long as the GOG managed the process properly, it could prove successful, she thought.

Comment

17. (SBU) The eleventh-hour surge in repatriating Liberians is welcome, but the local integration of the 40,000 remaining Liberian refugees will doubtless take many months and we can expect some bumps along the road. In the end, the good intentions of both the GOG and UNHCR will probably secure the refugees' cooperation, who are left with the choice of submitting to the decisions of the Ghanaian authorities or returning to Liberia. Those who stay in Ghana may have difficulty becoming self-sufficient, particularly if they are not granted work/residence permits or are relocated to rural regions with few economic opportunities.

BRIDGEWATER